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ABSTRACT

The generally accepted concept of inclusion is that students with disabilities attend classes with their general education peers with direct support from special educators. This digest discusses the rationale for inclusion in middle schools, explores recent research on inclusion, and discusses barriers to implementation. The digest notes that the rationale for inclusion has never rested on research findings, but on principle. Proponents insist that the integration of students with disabilities is inherently right, compared often to the same right to racial integration. Both opponents and proponents of inclusion can find scattered research to support their respective views, although current research is inconclusive. Opponents point to research showing negative effects of inclusion, often citing low self-esteem of students with disabilities in the general education setting and poor academic grades. Proponents point to research that shows positive results for both special and general education students, including academic and social benefits. The digest concludes with a discussion of the barriers to inclusion, which generally fall into three categories: organizational, attitudinal, and knowledge barriers. (LPP)

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Inclusion in Middle Schools

Rebecca A. Hines

Current legislation supports the concept of including students with disabilities in the general education classroom but leaves many wondering, "Is this approach working?" Determining the effectiveness of this practice is a task not easily accomplished. The term itself—inclusion—is not found in any law and is used inconsistently in the educational community. Inclusive programs differ greatly from district to district, both in definition and implementation. Variables such as amount and nature of support provided to the regular classroom teacher differ dramatically from district to district, sometimes from school to school and child to child, and are not easily controlled for research purposes. This Digest discusses the rationale for inclusion of students with mild to moderate disabilities in middle schools, explores recent research on inclusion, and discusses barriers to implementation.

Overview

The rationale for inclusion has never rested on research findings, but on principle. Proponents insist that the integration of students with disabilities is inherently right, compared often to the same right to racial integration. The generally accepted concept of inclusion is that students with disabilities attend classes with their general education peers with direct support from special educators.

According to Halvorsen and Neary (2001), inclusion differs from mainstreaming in that students are members of only the general education class and do not belong to any other specialized environment based on their disability. This notion is supported by middle schools using the true middle school model. In these schools, students with disabilities are members of the classroom as their first association, not members of a special education population. Middle schools also lend themselves to inclusive practices because the co-teaching model (common in middle schools) is more successfully implemented where interdisciplinary teaching teams share planning.

The Twenty-First Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Research/OSEP99AnlRpt/) reports that the number of students with disabilities served under IDEA continues to increase at a rate higher than the general population. With this growing number of students served and specific provisions in the amendments calling for more access to the general curriculum for these students, examining the research on inclusion is imperative to understand its effects and barriers to overcome.

Research on Inclusion

Kochhar, West, and Taymans (2000) draw from the research to conclude that the benefits of inclusion across grade levels far outweigh the difficulties inclusion presents. For example, they believe that for students with disabilities, inclusion:

- facilitates more appropriate social behavior because of higher expectations in the general education classroom;
- promotes levels of achievement higher or at least as high as those achieved in self-contained classrooms;
- offers a wide circle of support, including social support from classmates without disabilities; and
- improves the ability of students and teachers to adapt to different teaching and learning styles.

The authors further contend that general education students also benefit from inclusion. For these students, inclusion:

- offers the advantage of having an extra teacher or aide to help them with the development of their own skills;
- leads to greater acceptance of students with disabilities;
- facilitates understanding that students with disabilities are not always easily identified; and
- promotes better understanding of the similarities among students with and without disabilities.

Research appears to support many of these claims. Walther-Thomas et al. (1996) found benefits for both special and general education students in a three-year study of elementary inclusive settings where co-teaching was practiced. Improvements in social skills for special education and low-achieving students were found, and all students were reported to have developed a new appreciation of their own skills and accomplishments. In addition, all learned to value themselves and others as unique individuals. In a review of research on inclusion at both the elementary and secondary levels, Salend and Duhaney (1999) also report that academic performance is equal to or better in inclusive settings for general education students, including high achievers. Social performance also appears to be enhanced because students have a better understanding of and more tolerance for student differences.

Hunt (2000) similarly reports positive effects for both general and special education students at the elementary level. Academic benefits for general education students include having additional special education staff in the classroom, providing small-group, individualized instruction, and assisting in the development of academic adaptations for all students who need them. The author also reports that students have a better understanding of individual differences through learning in inclusive settings. In a meta-analysis of the effects of inclusion on students with special needs, Baker and Zigmond (1995) found a small to moderate positive effect of inclusive practices on the academic and social outcomes of pupils in elementary schools. Academic benefits were measured through standard achievement tasks, while self, peer, teacher, and observer ratings were used to evaluate social effects. Another study reporting perceptions of middle school students, their parents, and teachers indicated a shared belief that middle level students with mild disabilities included in the general classroom experienced (1) increased self-confidence, (2) camaraderie, (3) support of the teachers, and (4) higher expectations. The study also indicated that these students avoided low self-esteem that can result from placement in a special education setting (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999).

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Specific results for students with disabilities, however, are inconclusive. Salend (2001), like most who examine research on the effectiveness of inclusion, reports mixed results. While some studies show increased academic performance of students with disabilities in inclusive settings, others question inclusion's effectiveness. Likewise, some studies report positive social gains for students with disabilities in the regular classroom, while others report that students included have experienced isolation and frustration.

Tiner (1995) surveyed 120 teachers from six middle schools in one Colorado school district and found that teachers were most concerned with ensuring that all students have an opportunity to learn. Participants in the study voiced a concern that too much time was spent on special students and resulted in time taken away from others in the classroom. These findings have been echoed in the literature, but are these concerns valid?

Staub and Peck (1995) examined studies using control groups to compare progress of children who are not disabled in classrooms said to be inclusive with those in classrooms that do not include students with disabilities. No significant differences were found between the two groups of students. In addition, the presence of children with disabilities had no effect on either the time allocated to instruction or the levels of interruption. Other studies have obtained similar results. Hines and Johnston (1997) report results of a study of 25 general education middle school teachers whose schedule included "regular," co-taught (inclusive), and mainstream settings. Instructional interactions across the three settings were analyzed, and results indicated that there was no significant statistical difference in instructional time across the three settings, "but significantly more time was spent in managerial interactions in mainstream classrooms than in regular or co-taught settings" (Hines & Johnston, 1997, p. 113). The co-taught classes had the fewest incidences of correcting student behavior by the general education teacher. On a corresponding survey, however, these same teachers perceived that they had less instructional time when special students were present.

Barriers to Inclusion

The current barriers to inclusion generally fall into three categories: organizational, attitudinal, and knowledge barriers (Kochhar, West, & Taymans, 2000). Organizational barriers are related to the differences in ways schools and classes are taught, staffed, and managed. The National Education Association recommends that inclusive class size be no higher than 28, and that in classes including students with learning disabilities, this population should make up no more than 25% of the class. This arrangement could mean extra faculty in schools using co-teachers. Scheduling the amount of time needed for collaborative planning, especially at the middle and secondary levels where a co-teacher may be working with as many as six different teachers during the course of the school day, is another difficulty.

Attitudinal barriers, especially among teachers, have been explored as inclusive practices are implemented. The primary findings are that teachers agree in principle with the goals of inclusion, but many do not feel prepared to work in inclusive settings (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000; Hines & Johnston, 1997). In addition, collaboration calls for a shift in control and the sharing of a learning environment rather than having individual space, both concepts foreign to the traditionally trained teacher. Also, accepting new ideas about teaching, learning, and learning styles is called for and not always embraced by teachers.

Both general and special educators feel that knowledge barriers also exist in inclusive classrooms. In many cases, general educators do not feel that they have received the necessary training for working with students with special needs. Conversely, special educators may be at a disadvantage in middle level classes if they are not content experts and may thus be placed in more of a consultant's role.

Summary

Both opponents and proponents of inclusion can find scattered research to support their respective views, although current research is inconclusive. Opponents point to research showing negative effects of inclusion, often citing low self-esteem of students with disabilities in the general education setting and poor academic grades. For those supporting inclusion, research exists that shows positive results for both special and general education students, including academic and social benefits. Currently, the "issue" of inclusion appears to be moot. With legislation supporting the practice, schools continue to look for ways to include special needs students as outlined in the IDEA.

For More Information

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